

# Fairies in the Elizabethan Court Literature

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## Introduction

It is remarkable to point out that it was during the Elizabethan period when fairy tales as oral literature become more popular among local people. At the same time, fairies have started appearing in written works such as poems and plays. Since the late sixteenth century, a great number of writings of fairies have been published and spread to people in England. Fairies from this period frequently imply magical power and they are also regarded as supernatural beings. Although fairy tales and legend of them were popular among people until the end of seventeenth century, it was in the early nineteenth century when the concept of fairies as a small graceful woman or child has started.

In England, however, fairies have historically been recognised since Celtic times. The Celtic people had passed the stories of fairies down from generation to generation by oral tradition. The stories of fairies which include both good and evil aspects were very much a part of Celtic folklore. In spite of the fact that Celtic beliefs of fairies were abandoned because of the introduction of Christianity, people still believed in fairies, passing down fairy stories as the local legend.

As an example of early literary works of fairies, it can be found in *Le Jeu Adam, ou de la Feullie*, the works by a trouvère, Adam de la Halle in the thirteenth century. In this work, “we have a visit of three fairies, Morgue, Arsile and Maglore, which might be the model for all subsequent fairies’ visits”. Moreover, “it is noticeable that even Andrew Lang, an eminent mythologist, gives his fairies wings” (Briggs 9). Notwithstanding the fact that the Middle ages was Christian society, the legend of fairies had radically and innovatively been woven from one era to another. In fact, fairies are recognised in the legendary story of King Arthur. Also, in 1386, Chaucer described fairies as “the land or homes of fays” in his work.

It was in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century when the fairies in written work were the most popular. Throughout this essay, fairies in Elizabethan literature will be discussed if it could be said that fairies are one of

the typical characters of Elizabethan poems and plays. It will firstly analyse Elizabethan literature in general, focusing especially on the relationship between Queen Elizabeth and literature in order to find out how the queen has a connection with fairies. It will then examine fairies in Elizabethan literature, investigating particularly fairies in Lyly's plays and Shakespeare's plays.

## I. Queen Elizabeth and Elizabethan Literature

It is not too much to say that a huge number of poets and playwrights had flourished under the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Without doubt, accompanied by those literati, the performing art was one of the distinctive features of the time and the number of theatres had increased dramatically. In addition, Queen Elizabeth was exceedingly fond of pageants and performances, and she supported many poets and playwrights, inviting companies to act at the court. Moreover, the court was the most important for the social and political system in the early modern period (Wiggins 21-5). It therefore can be said that the growth of Elizabethan literature is fundamentally attributed to the royal court.

One of the remarkable aspects of the Elizabethan literature is that the ideal heroines can often be recognised as the representation of Queen Elizabeth. Glorious female character constitutes the central and distinctive feature in pageants, poems, and plays. Generally speaking, the queen tends to be embodied as a heroine with truth, beauty, and power in these literary works. Especially pageants, which were frequently performed for the queen in many places where the queen visited, include shows implying deep admiration for the queen as well as expectations for diplomacy and politics. The Kenilworth Entertainment and the Elvetham Entertainment are the examples of delightful and magnificent spectacles which were specially prepared for the queen's visits. As is presented in *The Princely Pleasure at Kenilworth Castle*, many rehearsals were prepared for welcoming and pleasing the queen (Gascoigne 34).

Also, as typical Elizabethan literature which includes admiration of Queen Elizabeth, Edmund Spenser's long poem, *The Faerie Queene*, can be suggested. The queen's virginity, chastity, and modesty are described through female characters like other Elizabethan literature. Many critics, therefore, mention that female characters in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* are the representation of Queen Elizabeth. Norbrook refers that "the faerie queene" is Queen Elizabeth that characters such as Belophoebe, Britomart, Mercilla, and Medina are "emanations of the glory of the Virgin Queen" (97).

On the one hand, the chastity described in *The Faerie Queene* and that of Queen Elizabeth are directly connected, but on the other hand, there are some critics like Boehrer who insists that Spenser focuses on a fundamentally political matter along with the subject of chastity (Boehrer 556). Indeed, "Protestant idealization of marriage conflicted with virginal image that by the late 1580s had become the established form of praise for Queen Elizabeth" (Heale 85). In any case, Elizabethan literature sometimes alludes to the political aspects of the time.

Despite negative criticism, Brooks-Davis states how Spenser influenced other Elizabethan literature as follows:

Although not the first adulatory image of her, it was early enough to be a formative influence on the cult which developed in the 1580s and 1590s, forming Elizabeth into Cynthia, Diana, Venus, Dido, Astraea, Judith, to name but a few of the biblical and classical figures with whom she identified: a powerful and carious Virgin Queen whose portrait could only be painted or engraved according to a strict formula (Brooks-Davis xix).

As the further example of the admiration for Queen Elizabeth, Cynthia in John Lyly's *Endymion* can be suggested. The play was "played before the Queen's Majesty at Greenwich, at Candlemas Day at Night, by the Children of Paul's".<sup>1</sup> It has frequently been said by many critics that Cynthia, the heroine of the play, is obviously the representation of Queen Elizabeth. Deats insists in his analysis of *Endymion* that Cynthia is an "elaborate compliment to Elizabeth" (73). Also, Knapp states that "it is obvious that Cynthia figures both Elizabeth and some aspect of divine virtue and that Tellus in some way represents earthly love" and "*Endymion* demonstrates how time helps establish a monarchy of love, rejoining heaven and earth in an ordered and uplifted hierarchy" (Knapp 353).

However, similar to *The Faerie Queene*, not all critics agree with the argument that Cynthia is the flattering of Queen Elizabeth. Neufeld claims throughout his article that the theme of *Endymion* is not compliment to the queen but shows a "profound anxiety about the monstrous shadow cast by the Virgin Queen" (Neufeld 352) from the perspective of the social situation in the early modern period. Knapp furthermore mentions that the play is not flattery of the queen but is a "challenge to her capacity for grace, to her ability to see beyond her own veil of morality", pointing out that Queen Elizabeth is 'vain' monarch of modern notoriety (Knapp 366).

In any case, *Endymion* includes typical Elizabethan strain of classical romance and the classical mythic world with Gods and Goddesses. The ancient world with a description of divinity and courtly love can frequently be seen in most of Lyly's plays. One of the reasons for the popularity of Lyly's plays at the court might be because of this classicality which could attract people at the court. Lyly shaped "court taste" (Smuts 54). As Hunter mentions, Lyly's "idea that the myths of Greece conveyed important moral lessons ties up closely with their court appearance in forms derived from the Morality or the Debate" (Hunter 143).

The world Lyly described accompanies "soft smiling" which is mentioned in the prologue<sup>2</sup> of *Sappho and Phao*, which says:

Our intent was at this time to move inward delight, not outward lightness, and to breed (if it might be) soft smiling, not loud laughing, knowing it to the wise to be as great pleasure to hear council mixed with wit as to the foolish to have sport mingled with rudeness (Lyly 7-11).

According to Daniel<sup>3</sup>, if Lyly wrote a man who loves the moon, he would be an object of ridicule; however, it is interesting enough to recognise that Lyly's comedies can be read with amusements. Everyone Lyly describes such as fairies, passionate lovers, good and bad people, goddesses, witches, and a soothsayer exists in the fantastic world. Whether to believe them or not depends on readers (Hashimoto 942-4).

## II. Fairies in Literature

It is notable that fairies are the distinguishing character among Lyly's mysterious and mythical comedies. Fairies are recognised in *Gallathea*, *Endymion*, *Midas*, *Love's Metamorphosis*, and *Woman in the Moon*. Although their roles vary in each play, fairies could be added to one of the courtly taste characters along with characters from mythology and virtuous ladies. As is also recognised in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, the image of fairies are directly connected to Goddesses and Queen Elizabeth.

Although fairies which Lyly portrays tend to be described as a harmless character who can communicate with people, general conceptuality of fairies in the early modern period were not always the same image as Lyly described. It is, in fact, believed in the sixteenth century that there were four types of fairies. The first type of fairy is the "Trooping Fairies, who vary from the heroic fairies of Celtic and Romance tradition down to the small creatures who stole the Hampshire farmer's corn". The second type of fairy existing in Britain is the "hobgoblin and Robin Goodfellow in all his forms, identified by the Jacobeans, and also by some later writers". The third type is "of mermaids, water spirits and nature fairies, a small class in Britain since the Trooping Fairies had assimilated many of them". The fourth group, "which is closely allied with the nature spirits, is of giants, monsters, and hags" (Briggs 12-6).

A Scottish king of James VI, later James I in England, who is interested in the occult and demons, introduces fairies together with other spirits such as witches, urchins, and hags. He mentions about fairies as follows: "the forth kinde of spirites, which by the Gentiles was called *Diana*, and her wandring court, and amongst us was called the *Phairie* (as I tould you) or our good neiboures, was one of the sortes of illusiones that was rifest in the time of *Papistrie*" (James I L1'). At the time when Lyly was writing plays and King James was compiling this book in Scotland, fairies were already one of people's concerns in their daily life.

However, it could be certain that fairies were not normally affable existence for the early modern people. More specifically, Reginald Scott mentions that fairies were used as a threatening remark when nurses put a child to bed, and moreover, they manipulate injuries, ill-omened matters, and failures. Fairies affect unfavourably in the daily life of people, and are generally connected to the devil. It is also said that fairies are told by a group of Scottish witches between 1550 and 1670 that fairies "do not come from wealth and privilege" but they "come from the deeps of misery" (Purkiss 85).

The conventional concept of fairies is clearly reflected in the speech of Imogen in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. Imogen says as follows just before she sleeps:

IMOGEN      To your protection I commend me, gods.  
                  From fairies and the tempters of the night  
                  Guard me, beseech ye. (Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* 2.2.8-10)

Although *Cymbeline* was written under the rule of King James I, the lines must show people's honest feelings for fairies as malign spirits in the early modern period. Fairies were "most commonly believed to be malevolent

beings who threaten and terrify mortals” (Butler 119).

In *Macbeth*, although again a Jacobean play, it is noticeable that Hecate and the three witches refer to the fairies and that they are reflecting their figures in fairies. In the caldron scene, the grotesque cooking scene of three witches and Hecate, Hecate says as follows:

HECATE     O, well done! I commend your pains,  
                 And every one shall share I’th’ gains.  
                 And now about the cauldron sing,  
                 Like elves and fairies in a ring,  
                 Enchanting all that you put in.  
                 (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 4.1.39-43)

Purkiss indicate about this scene that “in concluding the manufacture of a spell with a trope which compares the witches to fairies, the Weird Sisters are bracketed as figments of the dramatic imagination” (230). If they are regarded as figments, it is an interesting example of witches mentioning fairies as both witches and fairies could be categorised together as demons.

Although evil power of fairies is sometimes connected to witches in the way that fairies are often stated as one of the spirits of demons in the Jacobean period, the image of witches described in plays are more visible whereas fairies tend to exist in the imagination. When witches in plays are considered, characters such as Joan la Pucelle in *The First Part of King Henry VI* or Lady Macbeth are also called witches, though they are not witches in *Macbeth* and *The Witch of Edmonton*. Although this fact may be historically attributed to a religious concept of witchcraft, what can be said is that witches tend to exist clearly as rather malicious characters.

In contrast to the bad image of general fairies in the early modern period, it seems that fairies in literature are rather symbolised as good characters. In Lyly’s plays, they take part in human love, giving some advices to people who are suffering from love. In *Endymion*, Corsites says when he sees fairies as follows:

CORSITES   But what these so fair fiends that cause my hairs to  
                 stand upright and spirits to fall down? Hags — out, alas!  
                 Nymphs, I crave pardon. (Lyly, *Endymion* 4.3.30-32)

As Bevington points out that “Corsites instantly regrets having called these powerful spirits ‘Hags’” (Bevington 155), they are not regarded as a wicked existence but fairly likable existence.

Fairies therefore impresses favorably in *Endymion*. They are protecting Endymion and Corsites. When Corsites is trying to remove Endymion in order to carry out the Tellus’s promise, the fairies appear and make Corsites stop doing it by pinching<sup>4</sup> and sending him to sleep. Innocent Corsites, who is madly in love with Tellus, is exploited by her and is asked to take Endymion to her. He does not know her stratagem, thinking that he is loved by her. The fairies guard Endymion against danger, but at the same time, the fairies are saving Corsites from a

trick. The fairies certainly keep them safe, and let them think that fairies are always close to them.

On the stage, they perform with people as earthly existences, manipulating people's love. In *Gallathea* which was written just before *Endymion*, although fairies are in Diana's service, they are friendly to people. Cupid speaks to a fairy as follows:

CUPID	I pay thee sweet wench, amongst all your sweet troope, is there not one that followeth the sweet test thing. Sweet love?
NIMPH	Love good sir, what meane you by it? or what doe you call it? (Lyly, <i>Gallathea</i> 1592 9)

They are also depicted as innocent and chaste characters who do not know a "love faire" (Lyly, *Gallathea* 1592 9). Although Telusa is a fairy, she is naturally joining in the conversation with Diana, Gallathea, and Filida, and also keeping the relationship between Diana (a goddess) and shepherds' daughters (Lyly, *Gallathea* 1592 15-6).

More interestingly, fairies in *Gallathea* are described as if they were real human ladies. The fairies could occasionally be the maids of Diana in the way that their talk seems to be a conversation among ladies at the court. The relationship between Diana and the fairies also give the impression of the relationship between Queen Elizabeth and her ladies. Although the fairies mentions in the first scene that they are not concerned with love, they talk about depression caused by love in the later scene. The fairies are deeply involved with people and it seems that they are close friends to the people. Lyly's fairies are, therefore, far from the original concept of fairies which are related to witches and demons.

Another remarkable court play which has good fairies is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which also was performed in front of the Queen. It is said that "Shakespeare reified the comedy that Lyly fashioned, lending it greater dignity and power, for Shakespeare dared to present a more robust experience than Lyly's delicate play-things could suggest" (Beaurline 86). Indeed, Shakespeare might have learnt the image of fairies which Lyly has changed throughout his plays. Briggs also emphasises that Shakespeare, who got a hint from Lyly, "had gathered the things that most pleased him out of the wealth of fairy material to his hand, and had combined and transmuted them into our greatest fairy poem" (Briggs 44).

Staton who stresses that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is directly connected to Ovid considers that the fairies "would have drawn on classical mythology, and especially on that of the currently fashionable Ovid" (Staton 166). It may be true; however, Shakespeare described the fairies which live in the house, teasing people. Puck (another name, Robin Goodfellow) is described as follows:

FAIRY	Are not you he That frights the maidens of the villagery, Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern, And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,
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And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,  
Mislead night night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?  
(Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.34-39)

Although Puck is a fairy from a local legend, Shakespeare's Puck is a "jester and lieutenant" of Oberon, the king of the fairies. Originally, Robin Goodfellow was thought to be honest and friendly; however, "the weight of church authority was against them, as against other fairies", and regarded them as a sort of ghosts or devils (Briggs 15).

The negative beliefs of fairies are reflected to the last Oberon's song.

Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar,  
Nor mark prodigious, such as are  
Despised in nativity,  
Shall upon their children be.  
(Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.397-400)

In spite of the fact that it seems that the song still alludes to the traditional ominous image of fairies, it could be suggested that all this song is an emblem of "sweet peace". The song of unluckiness Oberon is the example of unexpected experience. The last Oberon's song in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also includes following lines:

Now, until the break of day,  
Through this house each fairy stray.  
(Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.387-8)

These first two lines of the last Oberon's song shows the fairies are accepted and welcomed by people.

With reference to fairies in the Elizabethan plays, the fairies are truly assimilated into people. Lyly graphically depicted fairies which are close to human and can communicate with people, and destroyed the traditional idea of evil fairies. Shakespeare then allowed fairies to come closer to people and to join people's life. In the Elizabethan plays, consequently, although the fairies are sometimes introduced as a somewhat frightful character, they are introduced not as an evil character but as a favourable character.

## Conclusion

The particular perspective of Elizabethan literature is that it tends to compose Goddesses, ladies, and young boys as characters; the mythical and mysterious world as stages; and love and other human relations as a theme. These aspects are illustrated in Elizabeth's favourite pageants performed at palaces, poems presented to the queen, and plays performed at the court. However, they are not only the typical aspect of Elizabethan drama

but lovely fairies are also, without doubt, an important character in the Elizabethan court plays.

Bringing these favorable fairies together with other characters into the Elizabethan court would be the most significant and remarkable attempt. As opposed to good fairies in literature, evil type of fairies or witches tends to appear later in Jacobean drama such as *Macbeth*, *The Witch*, and *The Witch of Edmonton*. It can therefore be said that nice and friendly fairies are peculiar to Elizabethan literature.

## Notes

- 1 Stated on the title page of the play.
- 2 *Sappho and Phao* has two prologues, one for the court, and the other for the Blackfriars. This prologue suggests the one for the Blackfriars.
- 3 Although this critique is written by Carter A. Daniel, the book which I quoted is Hashimoto's "afterword" in *John Lyly's Plays*.
- 4 According to Bevington, "pinch him" means 'a torment commonly inflicted by fairies as a punishment for illicit sensual desire.' John Lyly. *Endymion*. Ed. David Bevington. 153.

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